

## A LITTLE FLORENTINE LADY.

BY ELEANOR C. LEWIS.



BEATRICE PORTINARI. (FROM PHOTOGRAPH OF HER PORTRAIT IN FLORENCE.)

IN Florence, in the year 1265, was born the lady Beatrice were both loved with a reverent true patriot and mighty poet Dante. He could be passion the echoes of which still vibrate. mediocre in nothing, neither in thought, feeling, The children lived near each other, and first nor action; therefore his city of Florence and his met at an entertainment given by the little girl's

father, to which Dante, with his parents, was invited. How he looked at this time may be seen in the exquisite statue by Civiletti, a Palermitan

Beatrice toward whom his rapt gaze is directed. She is not there, alas! But how she would look if she *were* there, we learn from Dante himself.

"She appeared to me," he says, "about the beginning of her ninth year, and I beheld her about the end of mine. Her apparel was of most noble color -- a subdued and becoming crimson; and she wore a cincture and ornaments befitting her childish years." So elegant was her appearance, indeed, and so great her youthful charm, that he could find no words to address her,—he could only follow her with his eyes.

"She was a pretty little thing in her girlish way," says an Italian writer, "very ladylike and pleasing in her actions, and much more sedate in her manners and modest in her words than her years promised. Besides this, she had very delicate features, admirably proportioned, and full — in addition to their beauty — of such dignity and charm that she was looked upon by many as a little angel." Such as she was, she filled, then and forever, the great heart of Dante.

His second glimpse of "this youngest of the angels" was one day when he met her upon the street "arrayed in purest white," walking with two older ladies. She bowed to him, and this token of recognition was enough to make him very happy. After she had passed, he separated from his friends and hurried home,—to live over the scene in the solitude of his room.

When Beatrice was about twenty, she married Simone de' Bardi, and not long after this event her father—the kindly Folco—died. Dante did not see her at the time, but in one of his writings he depicts her great grief, as it was described by friends to him,—his own sympathy with her bereavement, and the sudden, piercing terror



THE YOUTHFUL DANTE. (FROM A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE STATUE BY CIVILETTI.)

sculptor. Beautiful in the illustration, it is even more so in the original; and we involuntarily lift our eyes from the young lover to gaze also at the

depicts her great grief, as it was described by friends to him,—his own sympathy with her bereavement, and the sudden, piercing terror

wrought upon him by the thought,—“Beatrice herself may die!”

And even so—all too soon—it happened. One day he sat writing a poem to her, a poem full of her praise, and of wonder at her perfection. But all at once, says Mrs. Oliphant, “the strain breaks off like a snapped thread, and a solemn line of Latin, abrupt and sorrowful, strikes across the fantastic sweetness of the mood, hushing alike the love and the song: ‘*Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo! Facta est quasi vidua, domina gentium!*’” (“How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! How is she become a widow,—she that was great among the nations!”)

On the 9th of June, 1290, when only twenty-four years old, Beatrice “was made of the citizens of eternal life”; while for more than thirty years her poet worshiper survived,—to honor her in deed and word, and to illuminate with her memory the stern pages of his “*Divina Commedia*.”

There are various portraits of Dante, but the pleasantest is the youthful likeness painted by Giotto on the chapel wall of the palace now called the Bargello, in Florence. Just so, we may fancy, he looked to Beatrice. For many years this painting was lost to sight, hidden under a coating of whitewash; and when, finally, the latter was removed, a break appeared where the eye should have beamed. Probably the same vandals who defaced the painted wall, in this place had driven a nail. For a few weeks the rediscovered treasure remained as it had been found. Then, unfortunately, another vandal, in the shape of a “restorer,” took it in hand; and under his transforming fingers, the severely beautiful youth of Giotto became a rigid young Florentine,—as the picture here represents him.

There are later busts and portraits, and also a cast of his dead face; but they are sad and grim,—a whole life’s journey removed from the enthusiastic boyhood of Beatrice’s lover.



GIOTTO'S PORTRAIT OF DANTE.  
(FROM THE TRACING BY SEYMOUR KIRKUP, ESQ. BY PERMISSION  
OF THE ARUNDEL SOCIETY.)

As to Beatrice,—can this prim, precocious little miss, shown in the portrait on page 813, who has the air of saying diligently, “prunes and prisms,” be the half angelic maiden of Dante’s adoration? Can it be that little Dante never saw her as she really looked? It certainly seems more likely that the Flemish artist has invested her portrait with some of his own national stiffness. If we imagine the lips curved upward, instead of so sourly drooping, the expression softly serious, instead of cross, why then, I think, we shall have no unfair idea of the nine-year-old Beatrice,—the radiant little “Bice” whom Dante loved.